[When I Ain't Got That I Do Anything]

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WHEN I AIN'T GOT THAT I DO ANYTHING

Pierre [Savoie?] was a short, stocky Frenchman. He sat under an apple tree in the backyard of his boarding house drawing noisily at a curved, worn pipe.

“I been here now about thirty-five years,” he said. "[I'm?] born in Iberville, Canada, but I lived in West Chasy over in New York State until I was ten years old. Just across Lake Champlain. My old man worked in the stone business there. A small shed. We went back to Iberville when the old man died. I didn't have much schooling. I ain't educated but I can write my own name. I was a carpenter in Iberville. When I was out of a job I come to Vermont. I heard tell how summer cottages was going up fast at Mallett's Bay on Lake Champlain. Lots of French from Winooski was building there and they liked to have French workmen. So I come down and got a job for the summer.

“Well, when the job was done I heard how the shed owners in the Barre district was complaining that skilled workers was getting too much pay. Good carvers got $ 20.00 a day. The owners was willing to break in new workers to save their own pocketbooks. That's how I got in the sheds. I didn't figure then that stonecutting was hard and dangerous work and that they had a right to strike for shorter hours. I wouldn't go anywhere as a stonecutter strikebreaker again. Not now. Not for twice the money.

That strike started in April, just when the sheds was busy with their Memorial Day orders. In '22. It was bad for Barre. Around that time southern granite — like Georgia granite — wasn't known at all except for building purposes. It's a softer stone. It don't carve good,

Barre was getting most of the business in the country. Well, the workers struck. 2 For a while the sheds and quarries couldn't fill their orders. They was stuck. So they called in men, anyone who was willing to learn the work. And when we come we worked. By God, we worked. But we wasn't skilled, we couldn't carve and cut like those old fellows. All the memorials we put out was plain. You can go up the cemetery and see. Most of those with the dates from '22 to '24 are plain. Anyway, people got to talking about this southern granite. And first thing you know Georgia granite began to sell. It's still selling strong against Barre stone.

'I'm a polisher when I work in the sheds. $8.50 a day, but when I ain't got that I do anything. I'm on WPA now. On the brush gang. $2.80 a day. But I won't stay. Soon as something turns up I'll quit. I learned the polishing trade from an old Italian that roomed in the same house with me. He was good. I watched him run the machine and I thought there was nothing to it. I was fooled. The first time I tried it the wheel run all over the dam stone. I spoiled it. I learned it's all steady work with your arm. You got to keep the wheel going around with the same force all the time or you'll get wrinkles in it. Add you can't sell granite with a wrinkle in it. When first I'm apprentice I got fifty cents an hour. After five weeks the boss is pleased and I got raised to seventy-five cents. Then I started to work on the [Bucker?]. By God, I hated that. It made me jump up and down, up and down all the time just like the fellows that drill holes in the road. The pay was good, in a couple of years I made $1.25 [an hour, “One year I cut a leg with the shed was I have to stay home for six months. The lady where I roomed was good I paid her just a little and I helped her out in the kitchen for the rest. I learned to cook, I?] 3 can cook buns, cakes, break, fry all kind of meat. Last summer when shed business was slow I got a job in the kitchen with a railroad steel gang. Boss' helper, I was, and I mad good money.

“My first year in Barre I roomed in a business block on Main Street. A buch of us Canadians got in the habit of eating together. We'd take in all the church suppers — it was [good?] cooking and cheap, and a change from the restaurants.

“That's how I got to know my landlady, at a St. Ann's Society supper. A Catholic society for married French women. Mrs. Fournier did the cooking that night, we all liked it. Her husband died of stonecutter's t.b. the month before. She said she was going to put her insurance money in a house, and take in roomers and boarders. Four of us moved in next week. She made good. Next year another French woman began to take in roomers and boarders next [door?]. They was friendly, but they knew us men talked about the food and compared it, so there was competition. It suited us fine. Each one would cook the best she could, and still make a profit. I never ate so well since. The next year the woman [next?] door got married and moved away.

“I've lived in lots of rooming houses. Italian or French. Most of them were the widows of stonecutters, and they all had large families. By God, it's funny — the Italians stick to their Italian food, but it's the French that stick to their own language. Every French house I've lived in the mothers make the kids talk French. The last Italian house I lived in the two oldest kids could speak a little Italian, the two youngest couldn't understand it at all. 4 We're seven in our rooming house now. Five stonecutters, and two on WPA. The landlady treats us like we are in her family. In September of 1938, the Commissioner of Industries of Vermont enforced the use of goggles by quarry workers, and refused compensation unless the driller was wearing them at the time his eye was injured. Even before this law, our landlady used to keep after a couple of the quarrymen and see that they took their goggles. In the winter when they carried their lunch she made sure the goggles were in the dinner pails. It's a good thing they got to wear goggles. Only the men running plug drills, jackhammers, line drills, bull-sets, bit grinders and emery wheels are made to wear them. It's the owners of the quarries that's got to provide the goggles. It's a good regulation, and most of the fellows stick to it. Sometimes I wear them in the sheds. It's funny, if a man hurts his eye today the fellows are sure to wear glasses for a week or two, then they put them away until the next accident.

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“I never been near the quarries. I got enough of the stone right in the sheds. The blocks are lined up in the sheds, they're marked, then a man lines the stone up for the surface cutting machine, either for the polisher or for the hammerer. They make a joint on it, and it's most all rock face stuff. Last week Joe Santoamo, the owner of the shed where I used to work, was hurt. He worked with us. He climbed a ladder to see what was the matter with the crane. He got dizzy, he ain't young anymore. And he landed head first on the tracks that run through the shed. They took him to the hospital quick — that was in the morning — and, by [God?], he was back working with his men at three in the afternoon. Not hurt a dam bit. 5 “I ain't married. When I come down from Iberville, my mother come with me. She didn't live more than a year. I buried her down in Montpelier, down in the Green mountain Cemetery. She had a cousin there, and I never figured I'd stay in Barre all these years. I got a nice memorial on her grave. I was making good money then. Old Pete Sarto who worked with me carved the stone. The boss gave me the stone cheap. I almost married once with the widow who run the boarding house next door. But she had five kids. Nice kids. But I figured I wouldn't be my own boss no more. I'd have to work all the time, if I liked the job or not. This way when it's too tough I turn to something else. I like money, but I ain't going to break my back getting it.”